

COMPLEMENTARY AND ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE

What is it? How can we evaluate it?

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BACKGROUND:

Non-mainstream therapies (NMTs) are becoming popular and research into alternative medicine is increasing. Evaluation of NMTs involves additional problems to those common in mainstream research.

PURPOSE:

To introduce what non-mainstream therapies (NMTs) and alternative medical practices are and how they can be approached for systematic evaluation.

OBJECTIVES:

The participants will be able to identify unique aspects of non-mainstream and alternative therapy research and apply evaluation guidelines for assessing the validity of studies in these areas.

CONTENT:

Standard evaluation criteria for clinical trials will first be briefly reviewed. The lecture will then focus on special evaluation issues related to NMTs that include:

1. Assessing under-studied and under-reported areas.
2. Approaches to evaluating therapies that involve unusual diagnostic taxonomies and individualized treatment procedures.
3. Issues of non-blindability and appropriate controls.

4. The influence of publication bias and research published in non-peer reviewed literature.
5. Accessibility to alternative and non-English language NMT literature.
6. How much and what kind of evidence is necessary for implementation of a therapy.
7. The feasibility of implementing alternative therapies and research consequences of their neglect.
8. Dealing with the mind/body issue in cross-cultural research.

FORMAT:

An evaluation checklist for doing a "likelihood of validity evaluation" of NMTs will be handed out. The participants will then discuss these criteria and how they are addressed in a published systematic review of clinical trials using the herb Ginkgo biloba for cerebral insufficiency and a randomized clinical trial of classical homeopathy for recurrent upper respiratory track infections in children. Familiarity with evaluation criteria for clinical trials is assumed.

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